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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION REPORT - Middle East - Iraq  
PARIS - Friday, February 24, 2006

(A) SUBJECTS COVERED IN TODAY'S REPORT:

Middle East - Iraq

B) SUMMARY OF COVERAGE:

The spread of Avian Flu in France and of the Chicungunya virus in the Indian Ocean island of Reunion are two of today's front pages stories. Iraq and the "War of the Minarets" (France Soir) is the major international story, with Le Figaro reporting on its front page: "Iraq Sinks Into Civil War." But inside, Iraq's Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mohammed Hij Hamoud says in an interview: "The violence perpetrated by foreigners will not lead us to a civil war. The Iraqis will not fall into that trap. The Americans must leave Iraq, but not before the security forces have been able to reinstate order." In France Soir, Middle East expert Barah Maikail contends the confrontation in Iraq is not triggered by religious sectarianism, but he does say that "Iraq is on the way to being a federated nation, with a central government and at least three federal powers: Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish." Two harsh editorials (France Soir and regional Les Dernieres Nouvelles d'Alsace) comment on "the political defeat of the U.S. in Iraq" and the regional chaos that is creating. Le Figaro analyzes Secretary Rice's Middle East trip. (Se Part C)

The visit of Lech Kaczynski, Poland's new President, is widely reported. Le Figaro calls it a "visit of reconciliation after the disagreements in 2003 over the positions adopted by France and Poland vis--vis the war in Iraq." Le Figaro carries an interview of Kaczynski. Asked to comment on Poland's partnership with the U.S. in Iraq, Kaczynski says: "The expectations concerning reconstruction contracts were rather nave. In fact it is the media that formulated them, not the political leaders. Poland has attained its political goals in Iraq even if the result could be better. I am still hoping for the economic effects to come about."

Reactions to the murder of Ilan Halimi, the arrest in Congo of the gang leader who kidnapped the young Jewish French man and the memorial ceremony yesterday in the presence of President Chirac make up the rest of today's front page and editorial stories. Le Parisien devotes its lead to a PM Villepin and a poll which indicates that "after eight months of popularity, the Prime Minister is experiencing his first crisis." The poll shows he is losing percentage points in all areas: 33 percent think he would make a good president (-2%); 34 percent think he listens to the plight of the French (-3%); 35 percent believe he can reform the nation (-4%).

Le Figaro carries an op-ed penned by Defense Secretary Rumsfeld entitled "The War Against Terrorism Is Also a Media War." The op-ed is announced on the front page alongside a color photo of Donald Rumsfeld.

A short report in Le Figaro by Brussels correspondent Alexandrine Bouilhet on hearings on the kidnapping of the cleric Omar Abou in Milan, allegedly by the CIA, concludes: "The investigation by the Milan judges is exemplary. It demonstrates the impunity with which CIA agents operate. The abduction was orchestrated from the U.S. Embassy by consular agents, in other words, by diplomats. Their accomplices, who arrived from the U.S., stayed in hotels under their real names. They used Embassy telephones and Langley was kept informed regularly of the operation's progress, including via e mails."

Le Figaro also carries an op-ed by two sociologists on integration versus separate communities. Chantal Bordes-Benayoun and Dominique Schnapper conclude: "Multiculturalism, which followed the notion of the melting pot is slowing down. Democracies continue to be confronted to the same duality: while each community's culture is part of that group's right, is it not also necessary to share a history and common values between the various communities?"

(C) SUPPORTING TEXT/BLOCK QUOTES:

## Middle East - Iraq

### "Luminous Horizons"

Serge Faubert in right-of-center France Soir (02/24): "The Iraqi conflict, which we had almost forgotten, consumed as we are with Avian Flu, could be taking a turn for the worse. Iraq is on the brink of a civil war, despite the presence of 150,000 U.S. soldiers. This is a perfect opportunity to recall the pretext for the intervention: WMD that never existed except in falsified American intelligence documents.

Meanwhile, close-by, Iran is manufacturing real weapons of mass destruction. Its somewhat nutty President is upping the ante. And why shouldn't he? The Americans, who are mired in the sands of Iraq, are not going to launch a military operation against Iran. unless the Shiites in both countries unite against the invader. What is left is Europe. In this regard it is interesting to note that the aircraft carrier De Gaulle is on its way to the Indian Ocean. On its way to the Emirates for military exercises, it will be sailing by the coast of Iran. with British submarines. Certain sources do not exclude the possibility of an international military operation aimed at Iran's Iranian installations. Oh and we should not forget the fact that Iran has just decided to finance Hamas. Welcome to the new world order."

### "The U.S. Must Deal With Its Allies' Concerns"

Pierre Prier in right-of-center Le Figaro (02/24): "The recent bloodshed in Iraq have caught up with Condoleezza Rice and her tour of the Middle East, which had already gotten off to a bad start. Wednesday, when she was in Saudi Arabia, the Shiite mosque in Samarra was being destroyed. Retrospectively, her statement on Tuesday in Cairo that civil war in Iraq is unlikely was unfortunate. In Saudi Arabia Rice had to face the concerns of the regime over the Iraqi chaos. Saudi Arabia feels it is caught between two Shiite states, with one of them, Iran, pulling the strings in the other. Secretary Rice, who was counting on Saudi Arabia to isolate Iran, did not get what she wanted. While Saudi Arabia can hardly break relations with Iran, and proclaims Iran is developing a 'commercial' nuclear program, it is also concerned about the prospect of Iran acquiring the bomb. Secretary Rice registered a second public affront when she asked that funding of Hamas be cut off, except for humanitarian funds. The Saudi Prince answered curtly during the press conference that it was impossible to distinguish between the two. Previously, she had registered a similar refusal by the Egyptians. The Egyptian leg of the visit revealed America's indecisiveness in face of recent changes in the Middle East. And while the Secretary had tried to demonstrate to a floor of Arab journalists that the U.S. was bearing up to its responsibilities and mistakes vis--vis the lack of freedom in the region, she apparently was not able to draw the consequences from her own analysis: she acknowledged the electoral success of the Muslim Brotherhood, but did not condemn the postponement of the Egyptian municipal elections or ask for the liberation of Ayman Nour, the political opponent."

### "Vietnam in the Sands"

Jean-Claude Kiefer in regional Les Dernieres Nouvelles d'Alsace (02/24): "The U.S. has lost in Iraq. Not militarily speaking, but politically. The situation is spinning out of control. This was obvious since the 'triumph of democracy' in the form of free elections, which have in fact turned Iraq into an ungovernable nation. Who is responsible for the chaos and the religious confrontation? There is Al-Qaeda, and Iran. and Syria, which has been humiliated by the West, and all 'Jihadists' everywhere. What all these fanatics share is their desire for the U.S. and its allies to leave Iraq. Inside Iraq, tribes, clans, religious minorities, criminals and bandits are all fair game in the promotion of a civil war. What can the U.S. do in this new Vietnam? While President Bush contemplated for a time bringing the Boys home, to satisfy public opinion, the worsening situation could lead to the exact opposite: sending more troops to reinstate order. Simply because the implosion of Iraq, fanned by Iran and others, will soon spread to neighboring countries, especially those officially catalogued as U.S. allies. This would be a political catastrophe, leading to an oil crisis without precedent and not to be compared with the one that hit the West in the '70s." HOFMANN